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Intelligence Memorandum

Ceausescu's Vulnerabilities

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Ceausescu's Vulnerabilities

Summary

Romania's highly publicized independent foreign policy has long made Ceausescu vulnerable to criticism and pressures from his Pact allies. A major factor in his ability to withstand these pressures has been the tight hold he has maintained over the Romanian body politic. Recently, however, there have been signs that domestic opposition to his rule may be increasing.

Ceausescu's most visible area of vulnerability at home is the growing "cult of personality" that he tacitly encourages. Future economic conditions in Romania could prove to be the weakest link in the chain of hard-line domestic policies that Ceausescu has formulated since coming to power in 1965. Furthermore, there have been indications of dissatisfaction with the way he runs the party and with some aspects of foreign policy.



Ceausescu's current position nonetheless appears to be sufficiently secure to see him through any domestic challenges.

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Ceausescu's Reins of Power

During the initial period of his rule, Ceausescu stressed collective leadership, but subsequently he moved steadily to gain absolute control of the country's key levers of institutional power. His current posts, unmatched by any other East European leader, include:

- Party secretary general, a post he assumed from the deceased Gheorghiu-Dej in March 1965,
- President of the Council of State (December 1967), the country's corporate head of state,
- Chairman of the Socialist Unity Front (November 1968), the umbrella organization for mass activities established in the wake of the invasion of Czechoslovakia,
- Chairman of the Supreme Defense Council (March 1969), Romania's paramount body for formulating defense and military policy,
- Chairman of the Supreme Council for Economic and Social Development (May 1973), a joint party and government organ mainly intended to promote economic efficiency,
- President of the Republic (March 1975).

This concentration of power is consistent with Ceausescu's personal characteristics, his basic policies, and Romanian traditions. Ceausescu at age 57 is an egotistical, shrewd, dyed-in-the-wool national Communist goading his country through forced-draft modernization. His obsession with propelling Romania to the status of an industrially developed nation by 1990 is, however, based not so much on Communist doctrine as on the conviction that only thus can Romania survive Moscow's imperial impulses.

At the same time, Ceausescu's nationalist outlook often suggests a sense of inferiority; he acknowledges that Romania is one of the least developed socialist countries. He probably views his steady acquisition of political and economic power as the most certain way to bolster national confidence and to force economic development. Between now and 1990, he will alienate himself from Moscow even further by using Romania's underdeveloped status both to identify more closely with the nonaligned movement and to insist that CEMA give top priority to equalizing the level of development of

its members. Each of these points increasingly clashes with doctrinal views that the Soviet party has long considered non-negotiable.

Ceausescu's "Cult of Personality"

Ceausescu's decision to hold all the reins of power has predictably led to a "cult of personality" that in some key respects works to his advantage. He rules a country that has never had a genuine democratic tradition. Indeed, strong central authority has more often than not meant protection and hope for the Romanian people. His people have traditionally considered human frailty in a leader to be a plus factor. Most Romanians are thus willing to tolerate considerable domestic mismanagement and belt-tightening so long as Ceausescu can credibly claim that his policies are keeping the Soviets out of Romania.

On the negative side, however, there lurks the real possibility that the "cult" will make too many people afraid to disagree with Ceausescu. Opportunists bent on promoting their own careers can be prone to acclaim everything that he proposes. A serious miscalculation in policy is thus possible, particularly if the "cult" continues to grow.

A lesser, albeit important, negative aspect of the "cult" is public resentment of the attention given to Ceausescu's family. Many Romanians are especially irked by the high party rank and also by the conduct of his wife Elena. She is strong-willed, generally abrasive in personal contacts, and often meddles in personnel appointments. Moreover, Ceausescu's three children—all in their twenties—have been much in the spotlight, and their generally poor conduct has reportedly offended the public.

Signs of Opposition

Over the past year, there have been several hints of dissatisfaction in Romania with Ceausescu and with at least some of his policies. Some of the first signs emerged at the party congress in November 1974. Ceausescu personally had to intervene twice at the congress—first to decline the post of party secretary general for life, and then to call for the defeat of a proposed age limitation on all party office holders. He could, of course, pretend modesty in taking the first step, but the fact that his intervention was necessary suggests that strong elements in the party opposed the life-tenure proposal. Some of the same people may have sponsored the second proposal, which would, in effect, have set a terminal date on his tenure.



Ceausescu waves to delegates at Romanian Party Congress in November 1974

Significant post-congress changes in the party statutes also pointed to discontent. Ceausescu's moralistic, puritanical streak emerged in the "ethical code" governing the personal conduct of party members, who must now pledge to obey all party decisions. More importantly, only the Political Executive Committee—the party's supreme policy organ—has the authority to appoint and remove members of the Central Committee. These and other changes were probably intended to minimize disaffection and thus tighten Ceausescu's control.

Romania's parliamentary elections last March indicated increasing worker dissatisfaction with the regime's economic priorities. The number of negative votes was still small, but it did increase to nearly 180,000—compared to about 31,000 in the elections of 1969. The highest percentage of these votes came from such industrial counties as Sibiu, Prahova, Cluj, and Brasov.

Some of these areas have large minority groups, but some also were places where dissatisfied workers engaged in industrial sabotage in 1974. [redacted] long hours, low pay, and extremely poor living conditions prompted the sabotage.

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The most recent sign of disaffection came in mid-October, when Ceausescu made a bow to the public by announcing extensive increases in the availability of food and consumer durables through next June. He almost certainly made this rare gesture because he was convinced that consumer reaction to shortages of sugar, milk, and cooking oil had become critical in a number of counties, particularly after the July floods. The announcement followed a spate of rumors about disturbances that severe food shortages were creating. Ceausescu's concession came after his decision to postpone planned talks with President Tito, raising the possibility that the disturbances were more serious and widespread than available reporting indicated.

Some observers believe that Ceausescu's practice of frequently shuffling the membership of top party and government agencies is primarily intended to minimize the opportunity for opposition to coalesce. Ceausescu openly claims that these shifts develop more effective party and state managers. His approach has, however, resulted in a "revolving door leadership." It has taken a heavy toll of the politically savvy, older hands, replacing them with better educated, though politically unimpressive and more pliable, younger officials. There are doubts that economic efficiency is best served by the high turnover in top-level personnel.

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[redacted] there has been serious discord in the leadership over economic policy and relations with Moscow. Unspecified critics are said to have called for policy adjustments, although not for complete redirection of policy. Some critics reportedly believe that Bucharest has received insufficient rewards from its expanded trade with the West. Others allegedly favor greater accommodation with the Soviets, while still others are said to want less stress on the development of heavy industry.

Threats to Ceausescu's Control

The signs of opposition to Ceausescu, although perhaps becoming more frequent, are still relatively vague and sporadic. Individually or collectively, they do not yet pose a credible threat to his primacy, but they bear close watching. They also suggest a range of possible actions—internal or external—against him.

A Coup: Despite the signs of growing domestic opposition, this appears to be the least likely threat to Ceausescu. The major considerations arguing against a palace coup or a Soviet-instigated overthrow almost certainly are Romanian fears that the Soviets might somehow benefit, and the absence of a credible successor.

The party leadership seems free of organized factions, and there is no cohesive pro-Soviet clique that might try to capitalize on disenchantment with Ceausescu. To the extent that differences exist in the leadership, they seem to focus mainly on adjusting policy rather than on sharp changes. The composition of those critical of a given policy also reportedly varies from issue to issue.

Ceausescu's "revolving door leadership" has made it very difficult—probably by design—for opposing elements to organize a clique to oust him. In any case, the Romanian party does not have a legacy of factionalism—a phenomenon that more than likely reflects the nation's tradition of passively accepting strong central authority.

The more serious threats, then, emanate from Moscow, and they could take several forms.

Economic Sanctions: The Ceausescu leadership knows that its obstructionist tactics within CEMA entail serious risks, including economic sanctions. Bucharest nonetheless is clearly determined to stick to its guns, and will continue its efforts to ensure that the pace and type of integration does not impinge on its sovereignty. The Romanians will demand that the level of economic development of all CEMA members be equalized; they will also insist that "procedural" arrangements, such as CEMA-EC relations, grant individual CEMA members the right to negotiate with the EC.

There is no evidence that Moscow and its loyalist allies intend to apply economic sanctions against Bucharest, but Romania would certainly be vulnerable to any such action. The country lacks both coal and iron ore, and has long been a leading importer of Soviet coke—taking nearly one fourth of all Soviet exports in 1974. Moreover, the Soviet coke supply is tight because of a steady rise in domestic requirements, and coke available for export from other East European countries is also limited.

It would thus be relatively easy for Moscow to plead that it is unable to meet increased Romanian demands or to insist on some form of export rationing in accordance with the Soviet-dominated CEMA Secretariat's view of what CEMA integration requires. Because such restrictions could severely affect Romanian heavy industry, Bucharest is actively seeking alternative sources of supply, including purchase of a substantial interest in a US coal mining company. The Romanians reportedly are also having difficulty in obtaining a sufficient allotment of iron ore from the Soviets.

Another potentially troublesome area is Romania's relatively close and expanding economic and commercial relations with non-Communist nations, which now account for over one half of Romanian foreign trade. As the country continues to develop greater economic independence and trades with a wider range of nations, it finds itself facing soaring import costs, expensive—and perhaps increasingly scarce—credit, and the uncertainties of the world money market. It also must find hard currency markets for its finished and unfinished goods, and at the same time maintain a strong and growing economy at home.

Ceausescu knows that it is not easy to keep all these balls in the air at the same time. Should the Romanians fumble badly, they would obviously be in a poor position to parry any Soviet attempt to draw them back into line. Although the regime has evidently avoided tempting Moscow to meddle in Romanian economic matters, some top-level officials reportedly believed earlier this year that Ceausescu's opening to the West had paid insufficient dividends. This private criticism has reportedly abated, and there is no evidence that the Soviets tried to exploit the differences. If the discord re-emerges in a stronger and public form, however, it could provide other CEMA regimes with a tempting target.

Soviet Meddling in Romania: One of the most remarkable aspects of Ceausescu's decade in power is the relative absence of specific charges—even from the congenitally anti-Russian Romanians—of Soviet interference in Romanian internal affairs. The only exceptions are the puzzling and still unexplained General Serb case of late 1971, and Ceausescu's speech in May 1967, when he rebuked the Soviets—and perhaps other allies—for seeking to develop ties "outside the organized framework of the party."

In every major speech, Ceausescu nevertheless warns against foreign interference. When a group of Cominformists—pro-Soviet subversives—was tried and convicted in neighboring Yugoslavia, Ceausescu reacted by cranking up his internal security forces to detect and quash any similar activities by the Soviets and others in Romania.

Ceausescu's accelerated economic development program is becoming both harder to implement and harder to sell. He appears quite capable of coping with the situation, but from a Soviet point of view, the combined problems of consumer grumbling over food shortages, a worsened hard-currency picture, disappointing crops, and other economic problems stemming from the devastating floods last July offer substantial issues for promoting disaffection with his leadership. Romania's two million ethnic Magyars are an especially attractive target.

A New Soviet Leadership: Some of the reporting about Brezhnev's illness earlier this year clearly reflected deep concern in Bucharest over a possible shake-up in the Kremlin. The Romanians reportedly feared either that Kirilenko would succeed Brezhnev or that the Soviet military would gain a dominant role in any post-Brezhnev scramble for power. They were also allegedly worried that a Kremlin power struggle could restore a collective leadership, a phenomenon that might embarrass Ceausescu's pronounced one-man show.

Whenever Brezhnev leaves the scene, the Romanians know that their selective defiance of Moscow will have to be tuned to the limits of tolerance of his successor, whether it is a collective or a new boss. Bucharest, and indeed most East European countries, would prefer the first alternative because of the greater freedom of maneuver that collegiality provides.

From the Romanian point of view, the worst option would be a dominant role for the military. Bucharest knows that Moscow's marshals would brook little foot-dragging in the Warsaw Pact. Bucharest could probably learn to live with Kirilenko. When Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964, the anguished Romanians were ascribing many of the same tough qualities to Brezhnev that they now attribute to Kirilenko.

Soviet Military Intervention: The ultimate threat to the Ceausescu regime, of course, is Soviet military intervention. There is absolutely no evidence that the Soviets intend to take such a step, but Ceausescu's careful tailoring of his resistance to Kremlin policies shows he is aware of the risks that an independent foreign policy involves. Should the Romanians grossly miscalculate the limits of Moscow's toleration, Bucharest also knows that detente certainly would not deter the Soviets from acting. Meantime, the leadership jealously preserves the leading role of the party and tight internal controls, thereby depriving the Soviets of the reasons that they used to "justify" their invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Even in the event of military intervention, the Kremlin probably would find it difficult to install a Quisling who could succeed in preventing Romania from becoming a heavy burden on the Soviet economy. Furthermore, it would be very difficult for any Soviet satrap to maintain stricter internal controls or better preserve the party's leading role than has Ceausescu.

Should Moscow nevertheless decide to intervene, Colonel-General Alexandru Draghici, a former interior minister, probably would be their candidate to replace Ceausescu. Draghici, whose name is synonymous with Soviet influence in Romania in the 1950s, was ousted by Ceausescu in 1967.

Outlook

Ceausescu's grip on power is part of a growing paradox in Bucharest. Romania's political, economic, and even military opening to non-Communist countries—including the US, the nonaligned world, and Portugal—is widening, to Moscow's irritation. His domestic policies have generally become tighter, however, in response to the domestic strains that his accelerated economic development program and his dogged independent line entail.

Ceausescu's longer range problem is the erosion of popular confidence, particularly within party ranks. Tangible improvement in the economic sector and perhaps some relaxation in the cultural field would, of course, help to head off the problem. If internal pressure mounts against consumer hardships, the cult, or excessive regimentation, he has enough flexibility to give a bit—as he did last month—without radically revising his regime's priorities.

Moreover, he knows that the traditional passivity and the ingrained anti-Russian outlook of the Romanian people will probably allow him to pursue his course by making only minor adjustments in domestic policy. As a hedge, he has used his power to make it more difficult for either domestic or foreign opponents to undermine his position. He has thus ensured that his mandate derives from broad, not elite, party and state organs—from the party congress and parliament rather than from the party's central committee or the government's Council of State.

Ceausescu's power should enable him to cope with any purely internal and most external challenges to his authority. He exuded such confidence earlier this fall when, in speaking to the tenth congress of the Romanian youth organization, he stressed the theme of a Romanian nationalistic poem of the nineteenth century—to oversee his country's affairs so that all Romanians "may live like lions and remain unchained forever."